

NEW RESEARCH FIELDS*

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If we go back to the Lake Placid Conference reports and to the efforts of its delegates to find a suitable name for the new area of education, which they were proposing to develop, we find that they hoped to become a branch of the science of economics. Their field was to be the economics of consumption. That aspiration was indicated by the name, home economics, which they finally adopted. Reports of Conference sessions provide at least one interesting account of the obstacles they faced. One of the early leaders, following a report on portions of Alfred Marshall's Economic Theory, observed that economics was a new science. Its theories were difficult to follow. Was it really necessary to understand them to develop theories of consumption?

The leaders were in real difficulty. Most of them had done their work in chemistry. They were teaching foods and sanitation. These fields were important. There was much to be done in them. The science of chemistry was well developed and respectable. Administrators recognized its importance. The new field, seeking acceptance and respect, leaned heavily upon its chemists. That they responded nobly is a matter of record. That their influence continues strongly is evident. Curricula in home economics included heavy requirements in chemistry. That it trained the mind and weeded out poor students were ideas firmly entrenched. That it also made it impossible for students within the limits of four years to become acquainted with the social science only became evident in time.

When money became available for research, home economists with sufficient education to carry it on were only found among those who had found chemistry to their liking. Once they were established, professorships in foods and nutrition, and research projects in those fields were maintained. When Purnell funds became available there was wide attention to consumption studies. These usually were studies of expenditure rather than consumption but they are of some value in securing knowledge of use of nondurable wealth and services. They are less useful as indicating the use of durable goods. Information about food and medical care is the most significant of that secured by them.

The undergraduate training of home economists was so weak in scientific areas other than the physical sciences that even when some farsighted administrator allocated funds for research in the social sciences, personnel for doing the work usually could not be found. Most of the women in Liberal Arts seemed to specialize in English, languages, and history which were respectable for women. Economists, sociologists, and psychologists among the men were busy developing the body of theory in their field and methodology for research.

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Besides, home economics was regarded as a woman's business, and men considered its problems at a professional level infrequently.

Perhaps the early home economists were simply before their time when they contemplated a theory of consumption as a part of economics. Economic theory dealt primarily with production. There was considerable controversy over even the basic elements of that science. Sociology took some time in breaking away from economics and political economy. Psychology also was slow to develop. Home economists were especially interested in applying scientific theories to the improvement of individual human beings and of family life. They had to wait until a recognizable body of theory was agreed upon and methodology for research was developed before practical applications could be made.

The social sciences have arrived at a state of development which offers to home economists fields of investigation which are relatively untouched. Economics still is engaged preponderantly with production but there is enough interest in consumption and ideas in that field have advanced far enough that in 1945 the address prepared by Joseph S. Davis, president of the American Economics Association, for the annual meeting of the Association dealt with that aspect of economics. It was entitled "Standards and Content of Living." The household in which families consume is beginning to have a recognized place as a partial determinant of production. We have recognized its importance in the area of food consumption. We have still to investigate how its demand for other commodities and services will affect quantities and kinds of food and other goods which will be taken from the market.

Methodology in the social sciences has grown apace. At the annual meeting of the American Economic Association in Chicago, 1947 one of the sessions, best attended, was that at which developing methodology was described and discussed. The journals in economics, sociology, and psychology are full of it. Events of our times have served to enhance the prestige of the social sciences. We must get along with people. We must help them establish an economic and social order in which they will be better able to take care of themselves. Arrangements must be such that they can get along together. The questions are unanswered as yet, but it is clear that solution involves something more than chemical and biological analyses, important as these may be.

In families, the same kinds of problems exist. New opportunities for research in home economics appear as the social sciences continue to make progress. We need to know more about development of personality in families through the reaction of individuals to each other. We need to know more about the satisfactions and dissatisfactions they experience in the homes where they live. We need to know more about the things people prefer to use and how these are combined in consumption. Goods of no one classification -- foods, clothing, housing, nor automobiles -- are consumed alone. They are all used together. Studies of any one provide but a partial picture.

People sometimes say that sufficient work for solution of consumption problems has been done. We find people who suggest turning the problem of housing over to the architects. We are told that the architects know the answer in terms of construction. In home economics, however, we find that the structurally sound buildings may be extremely inconvenient to work in. Sinks are too low, storage place is inconveniently located, wall spaces are crowded with doors and window openings which make it difficult to get into the room the furnishings desired for comfortable living. We need more information on arrangements which make houses more satisfactory to live and work in.

On the other hand, we find workers in family life stressing the need for three bedroom homes for families with children. The need is commonly interpreted in terms of three bedrooms plus all of the other traditional rooms found in a house, at least, kitchen and living room, and preferably a bathroom as well. A single family house or at most a duplex is felt to be most desirable for privacy and freedom in living. From an economic point of view it is perfectly apparent that large segments of our population cannot afford, themselves, to pay for these accommodations with building costs as they are. Five-room houses for all of them today would take a very considerable part of our national wealth. Maintaining them, a great share of our income. Prefabrication which in theory should help solve the problem, is apparently a long way still from doing so.

If we find out what people actually have and what they expect, other than a three-bedroom house, we will find a basis for improvement in specific conditions. Cultures, community habits, the extent of variation in consumption within an area; the goods in the stores, and materials readily available all will affect the desires of families for housing and for other commodities. In the past we have tried to gain an idea of consumption patterns by getting records of the way families spent their money. This is only a partial indication of consumption. We need to know something about qualities and quantities of different goods consumed and the way adjustments are made in one area of expenditure, as clothing, or how all established spending habits are changed when expenditures in another area, as for a house or an automobile, are expanded.

Perhaps this is enough by way of suggesting problems which might be studied. A complete list would be too long for the scope of this paper. A consideration of the types of studies needed is of equal importance. Some of those for which need is most apparent are:

1. Studies whose purpose is to secure a picture of existing conditions. This description should be formulated in three ways: In terms of our standards as educators, in terms of the people who are found in them, and in terms of what is economically and psychologically possible for people to attain.

The investigation of existing conditions can be of general nature, as the coop regional housing study. We get a certain type of information from that. Plans for several houses which we might call "average" houses can be developed. At the State level, however, something more may be needed.

Plans for dwellings need to be developed suited to the incomes of specific areas, the building materials available, the approved pattern of family living, and where these are related to occupation, as in farming areas, to the occupational requirements of the family. Case studies can provide invaluable information to supplement the controlled interview in securing needed information.

2. Studies designed to establish definitions of "improvement" for each level of condition. This includes the formulation of specific terms for describing qualities of goods.

Here the traditional subject matter field of food and nutrition, clothing and textiles can make a contribution. They are actually working upon it now, but tend to remain in their own field of specialization, largely the biological and physical sciences, rather than joining forces with the social sciences to work effectively together. Coordinating committees upon which would be represented the different types of education and experience in an institution which would bear upon a problem under consideration would expand and add to the significance of many studies, presently under consideration or still to be planned.

In the area of use of goods, home economics students ask such questions as: How many bath towels do nice people use in a week? How many times should we use a dish towel? How often should we change our sheets? To answer such earthy questions, we need to know something about community customs and standards as well as the composition of the textiles involved and the probable soil. The answer must be related to the amounts to time and money that can be used to maintain standards. It will affect recommendations as to kind and quantity of equipment and cleaning agents to secure and as to the best methods for their care and use. Clearly, something more than analysis by methods of the physical sciences is required from those who would give realistic answers to consumption problems. Standards people desire to maintain are as likely to be matters of social determination as otherwise.

The home economist also needs to carry on studies which will enable her to define objectively the more inclusive conditions of living she starts to improve and the type of improvement sought. This will provide her with a starting point and a recognizable aim for educational programs. This lack has limited the usefulness of studies of the use of money and of time.

3. Studies whose purpose is the testing and development of instruments for securing research data, and of methods for their use.

The development of suitable instruments for securing data is an important field for experiment and study. Some of our theories regarding the validity of findings and the suitability of methods require testing in use in the area of consumption and family living. A recent sociological study, for example,

found that information secured on a questionnaire which was mailed to desired respondents was more effective in securing their opinion on certain points than was the face to face interview with them. Yet we are inclined to generalize and to say that controlled interviews are more effective than the mailed questionnaire for securing data. We can seriously question, also, whether or no we know the best method of securing data in the area of consumption. Normally we say that the shorter the interview, the more reliable the information obtained. But in order to get something of maximum significance in consumption and on many problems of family life, a great deal of information is necessary, if even a reasonably complete picture is to be secured.

Some of the data, required for securing a picture of family living and consumption, may be such as do not lend themselves to statistical or quantitative treatment. The family life committee of the President's Conference, while calling attention to limitations of the survey method also noted that "The most satisfactory technique for collecting data on activities in family life, though expensive in time and money, and energy, is that of actual observations of the members of the family over a period of time." In family living, generalizations secured by statistical tabulations may be so remote as to have no relation to the realities with which families have to deal.

It is highly probable that something can be done to make longer interviews fruitful than those which are commonly held to yield statistically valid results. Some means seem fairly obvious. First, instead of using our youngest, least expensive, and most inexperienced interviewers for administering a questionnaire or making observations -- even after exposure to a rigorous week-long training periods -- we shall have to use people who are experienced, sympathetic with the family's problems, and skilled in securing a cooperator's interest. Second, we shall have to exercise greater care in enlisting the support of the respondent. We must learn to make the interview itself interesting and worth while for her. We must emphasize giving in the interview as well as getting. Here the home economist is especially well qualified by the nature of her education and her practice in applying it to practical problems of the home. She can make a unique contribution because she is a home economist, rather than because she is merely an economist, a sociologist, a psychologist, or a chemist. Finally, the respondent should be provided with some reward for her cooperation. This need not be money. In general, I would say that it should never be... but that is generalization... without complete experience with a great variety of home-making respondents it certainly needs testing. Satisfactions in terms of prestige or of aid in attacking problems of the respondent or the respondent's family have been found to be very effective if skillfully conveyed.

4. Fundamental research, designed to discover and formulate principles.

To provide an example of what might be meant here is a bit difficult. It means giving an illustration of a principle that has not yet been found. But I think I know where one may be. There must be a principle back of the problem of providing security for individuals and families. Since I know more about economics than other social sciences I cannot help wondering what is meant when speakers say they think there should be security for every American farmer, or factory worker, or professional people as the case may be. What does this consist of anyway, and who decides when we have it, the family itself, or some social worker or politician or teacher who views the family largely as a bundle of problems to be dealt with.

Traditionally, agricultural workers and teachers have behaved as though they considered that higher incomes mean security. But only a little reflection reveals that this is not true. With higher incomes to farmers come also higher prices for the things the farmer must purchase. As a group they stand bewildered by a continuing predicament. They and we must recognize that higher incomes alone are not the means of security. There is something more. Nor is it likely that this something is higher payments of Social Security or wider coverage. These will undoubtedly prove as futile as other increased incomes unless some other basic provision is identified and provided for.

The solution of the problem is not obvious. But it is there for us to work on... a new field in which home economics people, with a suitable background in the social sciences as well, should be able to make a valuable contribution if they were to turn their attention to it.

5. Studies which provide practical guidance for solution of immediate problems.

In the area of providing practical guidance for solution of immediate problems, the home economist is already at home. She is discovering proper work heights and areas, arrangements for storage of the things families use, and other aids to efficient performance of homemaking tasks. She has learned and is prepared to teach a great deal about housekeeping skills.

In the area of social investigation and engineering, the home economist still lacks experience. But the field is open for her. Inevitably, her teaching of homemakers and other consumers, as well, results in the making of choices and judgements. Someway objective evidence of the results of such judgements should be secured. In the past we have made time studies which indicated how homemakers spent their time. We have cost of living studies which show how the family income is spent. But no objective evaluation of the results of these expenditures is attempted as a rule. We do not even find out whether the family or the homemaker found them satisfactory. We have assumed the disposition of resources was what the family or homemaker wanted or they would have made another. There may be some question as to whether or not we are justified in that assumption. We know that the want satisfying powers ascribed to goods before they are secured are not always realized in use. Or they may prove to be even more numerous than expected. We need to measure the results of resource use so that we can indicate that they are satisfactory or unsatisfactory as the case may be. As it is, we can make few recommendations to other homemakers on the basis of studies completed. In addition, most studies are unrelated to others of the same kind in the field so that generalization on the basis of combined studies also is hazardous.

To implement the possibilities for research, combining forces, coordinating problems, and pooling of results are desirable. Not many schools have on their campuses all the means for optimum development of research possibilities. In the larger schools, these may exist. Where desirable, however, home economists and others interested in these problems, should join forces. When this is done between institutions, progress may be slow. Everyone in educational institutions carries a heavy load. But even then, time should be allowed, and financial provision made to make cooperative studies possible. The present

committees, examining fields for research are useful. Their greatest difficulty probably, is that their work has been done by people who already were busy. There may be more hope for them in the months ahead when their members know that something further is to be done and can plan time to devote to them. There has been considerable exploration of ideas as to projects and method, so that we may hope to build upon them.

In addition to listing fields where research is needed we must recognize one problem which probably occurs to all of us as standing in the way of development of the possibilities for new research in home economics. That is securing personnel educated and able to carry it out. In home economics, our goal is development of skillful homemakers as well as teachers, research workers and candidates for other important professions. We get rather more consistent cooperation in the placing of homemakers than other workers. I am enough sold on economic theory, however, to believe that as positions are established and good salaries made available for home economists specializing in social sciences the required numbers of workers will follow fairly closely.

It is a method which I hope we shall try.

